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Playing Soft With the Soviets Will Bring Us Trouble

By George A. Carver Jr.

IN 1961, NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV used a summit to test the mettle of a new president of the United States. A quarter century later, a relatively new ruler of the Soviet Union seems bent on using another summit to prove his own mettle, while testing another American president. Khrushchev's conclusions led him to take the world to the brink of war. If present trends continue, Mikhail Gorbachev's could prove just as dangerous.

An emboldened Soviet Union could challenge the United States and its friends at pressure points around the world, from Berlin to Pakistan to Central America. Those who doubt the Soviets could pose such aggressive threats should remember the jostling that took place 25 years ago.

At the 1961 Vienna summit, Khrushchev was both insulting and patronizing as he alternately ranted and stonewalled. That summit's course, even the fact that it was held, apparently confirmed Khrushchev's assessment that Kennedy had little stomach for confrontation and hence could be bullied and bluffed.

Oversimplifying somewhat, but not much, that assessment led to August 1961's challenges: the construction of the Berlin Wall on the 13th, in direct violation of the 1945 Potsdam agreement, and then at month's end, the Soviet resumption of atmospheric nuclear testing—for which the planning must have been well under way when Khrushchev mendaciously assured Kennedy, at Vienna, that the Soviets would never be the first to resume such tests. The Kennedy administration's purely verbal responses to these provocations further emboldened the Soviets and 14 months later, the Cuban missile crisis was upon us.

In October 1962, the Kennedy administration used the U.S. Navy—backed by additional, visibly assembled forces that the Soviets decided Kennedy might well be willing to employ—to call Khrushchev's hand. Kennedy succeeded. Khrushchev nonetheless got considerable mileage out of the Soviets' classic gambit of easing back from something they should never have done in the first place. In September 1986, Gorbachev is essaying the same gambit with Nicholas Daniloff.

In exchange for withdrawing his missiles from Cuba in 1962, Khrushchev won a permanent mantle of U.S. tolerance, hence protection, for Moscow's Cuban client, Fidel Castro, no matter how much revolutionary mischief Castro undertook in Latin America or elsewhere. With Daniloff, similarly, Gorbachev is trying to get a permanent mantle of American acquiescence and protection for Soviet intelligence activities and operations in the United States, including those conducted out of the United Nations.

In late August 1986, neither superpower anticipated nor, probably, wanted a major confrontation when the FBI arrested KGB staff officer Gennadi Zakharov, whose espionage activities it had long been observing; the Soviets retaliated by seizing in Moscow an innocent American journalist, Nicholas Daniloff. Major confrontations, however, often arise unexpectedly out of incidents, situations or concerns that initially seem of less than historic significance.

The Reagan administration made the fatal mistake of responding to this provocative Soviet challenge with vacillation and rhetoric not backed by action—flagging a weakness that Gorbachev and his Politburo colleagues clearly felt they could exploit by raising the stakes.

The Soviets have a keen sense of historical irony and long memories. Most Americans have neither. In this regard, the Reagan White House is quintessentially American. In October 1963, the FBI arrested three Soviet intelligence officers in New York, one of whom—Igor Ivanov—did not have diplomatic immunity. The next day, the KGB framed and arrested visiting Yale Professor Frederick Barghoorn, on his last night in Moscow. The Soviets then proposed an exchange of Ivanov for Barghoorn, which the Kennedy administration coldly rejected. At a press conference two weeks later, Kennedy publicly demanded Barghoorn's release. Two days later, the professor was freed. In 1963, however, Kennedy made his public demand *after* he had demonstrated that he was prepared to use the U.S. Navy to make the Soviets abandon an unacceptable provocation.

The 1986 situation is quite different, since Reagan has never shown Gorbachev any similar willingness to back up American rhetoric, if necessary, with action. Instead, Reagan sent Gorbachev a letter personally assuring him that Daniloff was innocent. Gorbachev's response was to brand Daniloff publicly as a spy—thus publicly calling Reagan a liar.